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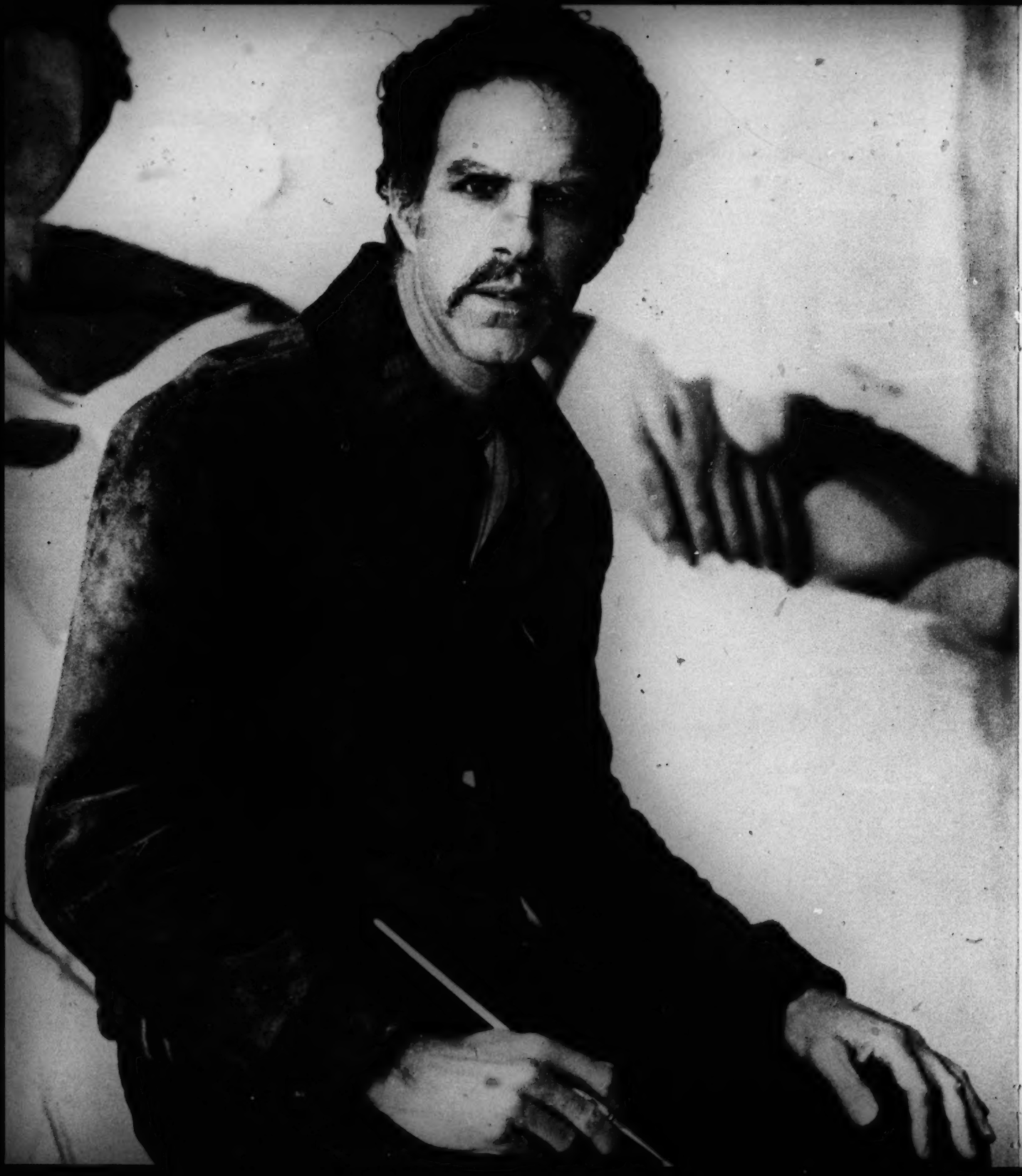
William Wilson



William Wilson

Giose Rimanelli

■ William Wilson, born in 1931, earned an M.F.A. at Cranbrook Academy of Art and came to S.U.N.Y. at Albany in 1959, where he is a professor of art. Mr. Wilson has received a number of awards in regional shows throughout the Northeast and has had more than ten one-man shows including one in Mexico City and the latest in 1974 in New York City. He also works in a number of sculptural media and has designed and built four houses.

I. The recent paintings of William Wilson's artistic experience offer two dynamic, yet simultaneous and related, possibilities of interpretation. They could be viewed as the chapters of a graphic "novel" whose subject is Eros in the piercing moment in which it articulates itself as a scream, thus creating those privileged situations in which one glimpses the "sacred", the forbidden. And they could be viewed as suppression, or repression, of such moments and situations with the hallucinatory intervention of the taboo, the censor who envelops them with a rough shroud, thereby transforming them into brutal moments of transgression.

It is a complex and yet simple "novel", tender and yet indifferent, transparent and ambiguous, like the same joy that consumes one within the taboo, the cover shroud that William Wilson presents in the interplay of opposing forms.

The cover-up may assume the form of large rocks or an inverted cliff of a strange smooth, almost liquid, texture that descends ominously like a curtain upon the stage trying to blot from memory the characters within. Or it may assume the form of articles of clothing in brilliant primary colors hanging neatly from a rope, or the slick surface of a poster illustration, or a crumpled grocery bag taped obtrusively over the nudes.

Each painting, each chapter of the "novel", is a *recit* that finds suspense exactly in the crystalline, almost harsh, quality of its theoretical ambivalence between nature and work, sex and society, feeling and reason, life and death.

II. The transition from animal to man, from nature to history, from the vegetative world of Eden (as seen in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* in the Prado) to the age of toil (as seen in Robert Rauschenberg's *Tracer* in the Collection of Frank M. Titelman) did not happen as a unique and definitive moment in man's cultural history but recurs cyclically in the psycho-history of each individual man.[1]

No sooner does man substitute the natural, instinctual order with the order of toil than he is struck by remorse, by the terror of having denied nature, even his own animal drives. In this repentance, he creates the "sacred", establishing nature ex novo, and for each taboo for which he had originally refused nature, he posits a corresponding transgression. In effect, the transgression does not deny the taboo, but transcends it and completes it. In the words of George Bataille, the human spirit is prey to the most astounding impulses. Man goes constantly in fear of himself. His erotic urges terrify him. The saint turns from the voluptuary in alarm. Yet eroticism, that which man seeks to cover and persistently negates in the world of toil, is an experience integral to life itself. It is a psychological quest, independent from the natural goal of reproduction, and therefore so important, so fundamental, that it is not alien to death.[2]

The fundamental motive of the Wilson "narrative" is the hypothesis that the relationship between the two extremes of life and death is the recognition of Eros as the only source of communication between man and the exterior world. It is that sexual achievement, as the potential key to life, is the key to the struggle to go beyond mere existence into a state of being. It is obvious therefore that in Wilson's paintings all human relations, acts, transitions and frustrations spring from the sexual relationship. Everything in his work, if it is not sex itself, is an extension of sex. However, in order to achieve the focus on the sexual aspect of existence, Wilson uses (like Moravia and Malraux, Sartre and Camus in their own proper medium) the technique which is the artistic transformation of one set of values into another.

In short, William Wilson, in much the same vein as Freud, Norman O. Brown and Marcuse, is himself convinced that our civilization, by imposing taboos as a way of reason, is an instrument of constraint, of suppression. Marcuse: The perpetual restrictions on Eros ultimately weaken the life instincts and thus strengthen and release the very forces against which they were 'called up' — those of destruction.[3]

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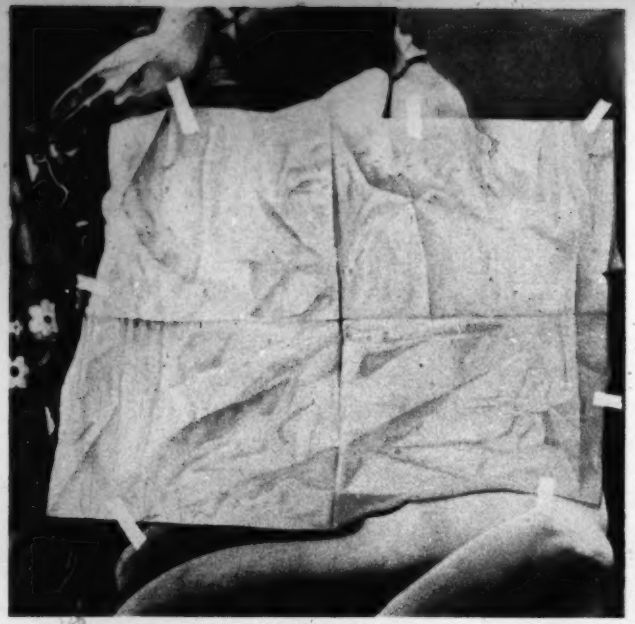

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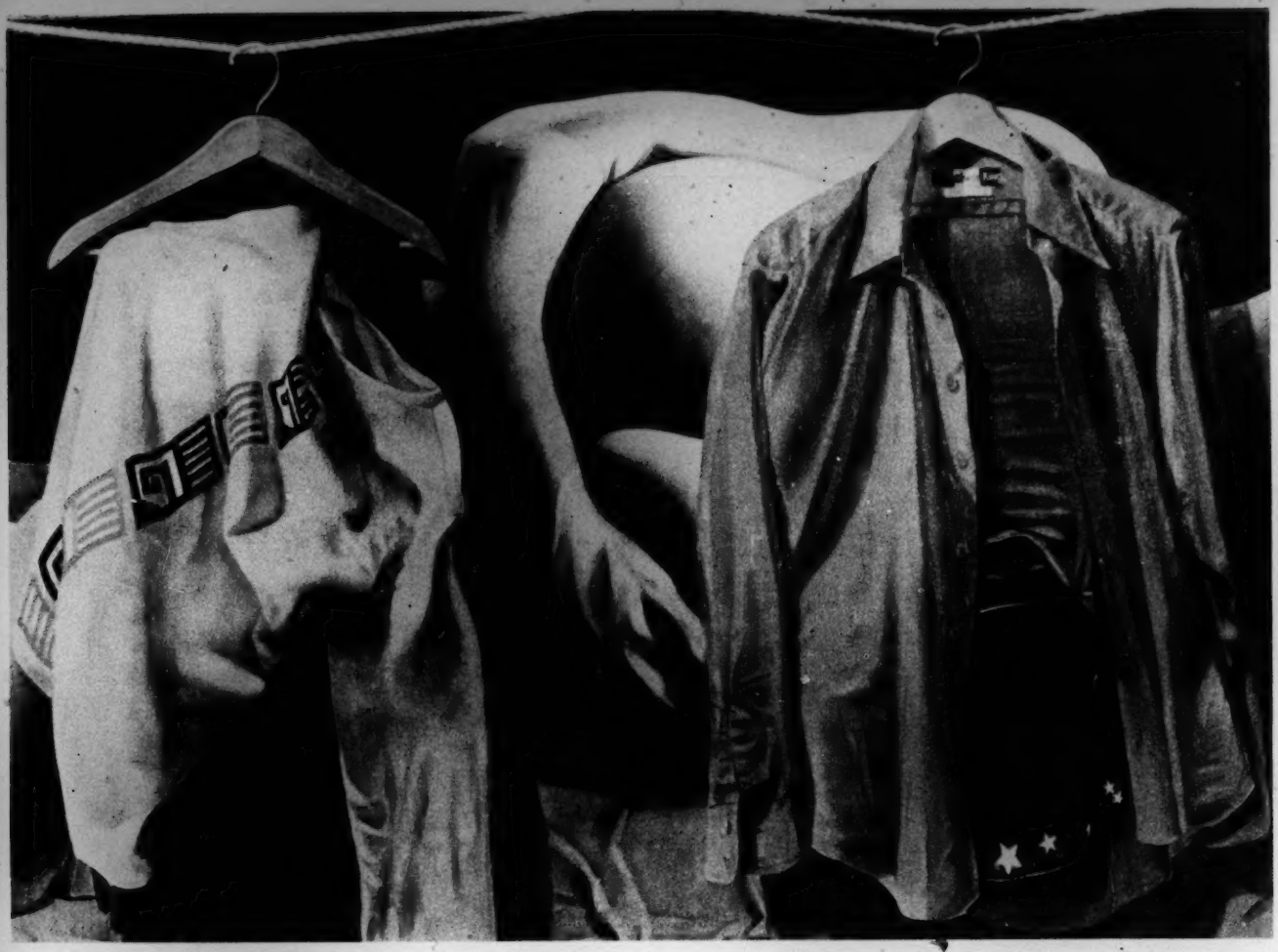
III. The human figures of these paintings, submerged and only partly perceptible, but already totally resolved in their acts, make one tremble with an obscure presentiment that the series of their acts cannot be infinite. This is so because between the possible and the impossible (two stages of illusion at any rate, here represented by that which covers and that which is covered) Wilson "*a fait entrer la pensee dans le jeu*",[4] a risky game, a dangerous game, that of the limit, the extreme, the forbidden.

Over his figures radiates the persistent light of a great absence, a frozen ecstasy beyond the stasis, *ek-stasis*, suggesting the void, nothingness, the extreme limits of being. For Wilson, the transcendence of being is this very nothingness: a supreme feast of the immanence which unites an interior experience with the supreme exteriority of the sign.

Jean-Paul Sartre once spoke of "*moments parfaits*" and of "*situations privilegiees*". In Wilson's paintings, there exists a "sacred" made up precisely of perfect moments and privileged situations: an operative centrality in which Eros is essential insofar as it puts into motion the dark side of being, a transgression, an extreme act of life that, in the last analysis, is directional and becomes the "ultimate reality" — the affirmation of the pleasure principle against the reality principle: a reworking of illusions. Wilson's art brings back all the perfect moments and the privileged situations to the same place: to the blending and the fusion of separate objects. This is an ultimate experience, *l'experience-limite* so passionately and thoroughly explored recently by Bataille. And the ultimate experience of '*hasard*' of William Wilson is exactly his wanting to weld the unconscious to the conscience.

1. Discussing George Bataille's ideas on eroticism, which involves a re-working on religion and philosophy (see Vico's theory), as well as art and literature, the Italian writer Elio Vittorini wrote his own chapter called "paradiso terrestre". *Le due tensioni. Appunti per una ideologia della letteratura*, a cura di Dante Isella, Milano, 1967, pp. 157-159.
2. George Bataille, *L'erotisme*, Paris, 1957, pp. 9-11, 15-30, 35-44, 45-54.
3. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros an Civilization*, New York, 1962, p. 40.
4. See Michel Foucault's Introduction to the first volume of George Bataille's *Oeuvres completes*, edited by Denis Hollier, Paris, Gallimard, 1970; and Bataille's *Sur Nietzsche*, in the Italian translation by Andrea Zanzotto, with Maurice Blanchot's essay by the title *L'experience-limite*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1970; and see also Piero Bigongiari's *La poesia come funzione simbolica del linguaggio*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1972, pp. 159-179. Recommended for a close reading: Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, Paris, 1957, and *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Paris, 1971; Roger Caillois' *L'Homme et le Sacre*, Paris, 1950; Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, 1959.

■ Giose Rimanelli is Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Albany. He has previously taught at Yale, Sarah Lawrence College, New York University and at the University of California at Los Angeles. He is the author of more than a dozen books, among which the novel The Day of the Lion (also made into a film), the poetry of *Carmina blabla*, and many articles on art and literary criticism.



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CATALOGUE

1. *Still Life I*, 1973, oil, 49 by 57 inches.
2. *Still Life II*, 1973, oil, 60 by 60 inches.
3. *Over-Come*, 1974, oil, 49 by 49 inches.
4. *Over-Whelm*, 1974, oil, 55 by 68 inches.
5. *Over-Grown*, 1974, oil, 50 by 68 inches.
6. *Over-Head*, 1974, oil, 49 by 49 inches.
7. *Over-Flow*, 1974, oil, 49 by 49 inches.
8. *Red Paper Overlay*, 1974, oil, 50 by 62 inches.
9. *Green Paper Overlay*, 1974, oil, 48 by 58 inches.
10. *Wrapping Paper Overlay*, 1974, oil, 57 by 57 inches.
11. *Hanging Clothes Overlay*, 1974, oil, 43 by 60 inches.
12. *Evel Knievel Poster Overlay*, 1974, oil, 72 by 72 inches.
13. *Torn Skier Overlay*, 1974, oil, 70 by 72 inches.
14. *Vermeer Overall*, 1974, oil, 49 by 49 inches.

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